

Chairman's Report 12th March 2020

I wish I was a bit more creative with an extensive knowledge of the arts, music and culture. That said I have been known to turn up to many an Airborne concert! However, mostly, and perhaps sadly, I have more of a penchant for maths and problem solving.

Bearing this in mind, and despite my artistic limitations, I found the first Window Wanderland, held in Shepton last weekend, to be both thrilling and inspiring. I was amazed by the displays at Haskins and the Anglo Brewery, and in awe of all the individuals who displayed their astonishing artistic talents in homes throughout town. In Garston Street alone, there were three window displays forming just one part of the grand total of 90 creations scattered across our clever and inventive community. Like the recent Lantern Parade and Snowdrop Festival, I can see that this new and exciting initiative will go from strength to strength. With the Art Bank now offering a year round creative hub right in the heart of Shepton alongside a growing sense of confidence in our town, I'm convinced we are witnessing a permanent and positive change to our town's fortunes.

Collett Park is the only Green Flag facility in our area and it's an amazing asset for Shepton. The Town Council has agreed that regular music will again return to the bandstand, and we are always on the look-out for talented local artistes and bands prepared to play on Sunday afternoons for all to enjoy. The first of our new season of free concerts will be held on 19th July. We are also planning a "Skate Jam" in the Skate Park in West Shepton Playing Fields on Saturday 18th July. It will be part of the national "Love Your Park" week and a great opportunity for skating enthusiasts to participate and see the skills and tricks of experts.

Also, you will soon be able to purchase tickets for one of the highlights of this year's Collett Festival. The Saturday evening concert on 13th June will feature leading Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams tribute double bill headliners. Watch out for the early bird offers in the coming weeks.

Part of my work as a Mendip District Councillor is leading a Social Deprivation Working Party to look at what measures local councils can take to improve people's lives. Whilst we can't directly affect national policies like the much derided Universal Credit, we can identify where there is the greatest need and expose the worst iniquities in our current system.

One thing I have learnt from this working party is that there is a tremendous amount of detailed data held by councils, the police and health services. Used properly, it can allow us to focus on the communities that are worst affected and identify those who are struggling with the most severe effects of deprivation. Shepton has areas where residents can be classified as deprived based on many of the key indicators in the data. This alerts the town and district council to the need to work together to stop people falling through the cracks in the system and do what we can to tackle some of the most acute and pressing issues. If we can start to get it right, we can affect and hopefully improve the life chances of our local residents.

Social isolation is a key theme that we need to address head on. Many younger and older residents are not accessing services or taking any part in community activities. For many people who live in properties that are damp and have poor energy efficiency, fuel poverty is a major concern. This isn't only a threat to health but it's also bad for the environment since energy is being lost and wasted. Just like the past weekend in Shepton, where we had yet another successful community event, we will continue to offer a range of activities covering sports, music and the arts. We want Shepton to be the place where a lot happens. Many of the key events in the calendar, including Collett Park Day and the associated Children's Festival (which returns this year) remain free to enter. Where we

can, we want to be able to invite those in our community who are struggling to be able to participate in many of our arts and cultural events.

Sadly, at times councils can seem disconnected and unresponsive to the needs of the communities they are meant to serve. Our upper tier of local government, Somerset County Council, has decided to spend £1million to try to change Somerset into a “unitary authority”. At the same time they are cutting support for older residents and decimating youth services. I can’t help but think that this is an unwanted move at a time when the County Council should be concentrating on making people’s lives better rather than tinkering with structural changes to local government.

It has been widely reported that the finances of the County Council are in poor shape, whilst at the same time, all the District Councils in Somerset are managing to balance their books despite national government cuts. It seems particularly strange that the County Council, in an effort to solve their own problems, is willing to spend a million pounds of taxpayers’ money to try to shut down all the District Councils in Somerset.

Chris Inchley, Chair, Shepton Mallet Town Council